

Chocolate

Food of the gods or the devil's temptation? asks *Marysia Kratimenos* while overleaf *Vilma Bharatan* describes the botanical properties of the cacao bean

Chocolate: one word can evoke such contrasting emotions. To some it's the ultimate luxury, a sensual treat, yet to others it is a wicked indulgence, the bane of their strict diet that relies on denial and the avoidance of temptation. In these diverse reactions the remedy picture of Chocolate is revealed.

The film *Chocolat*, based on the book by Joanne Harris, is as deliciously silky and smooth as a bar of the best chocolate. Rarely do film adaptations improve on the original text, but in this case the scriptwriter has managed to add even more homeopathic detail. This is the way to learn new remedies: curled up on the sofa, reading the book or watching the film whilst conducting a proving by indulging in the food of the gods!

The heroine of *Chocolat* is the enigmatic Vianne Rocher. Her arrival in Lansquenet, a sleepy French village, shatters the age-old tradition of *tranquillité*. Lansquenet adheres to the "see no evil, hear no evil and speak no evil" principle. Denial is the way of life: denial of human desires, human frailties and human emotions.

The character of the Comte de Reynaud is the embodiment of the Kali bich personality. In his world duty and tradition reign supreme. He is meticulous, precise in his every action. Each precious moment is strictly regulated and accounted for. He controls the town with an iron grip, insisting on conformity and unity. Individuality is anathema to his way of life and so the arrival of the free-spirited Vianne shakes him to the core. She epitomises the healthy Chocolate personality – vivacious, charismatic, sensual, alluring and potentially dangerous.

The unconventional

After renting out the old *pâtisserie* from the elderly Armande, Vianne works hard to transform it into the *Chocolaterie Maya*. Unintentionally she breaks every social convention that the Comte holds dear. Opening a *chocolaterie* during the Holy Lenten fast is the ultimate affront to his principle of self-control. And there's



Vianne Rocher played by Juliette Binoche in the film *Chocolat*

far worse to come.

She is unmarried and freely admits it despite the fact she has a daughter, refusing to invent a dead husband to hide the child's illegitimacy. Her honesty is seen by the Comte as flaunting her wanton behaviour. Vianne refuses to accept the Comte's offer to join the town in Sunday worship. Her faith is more pagan, and that incenses the devout Comte. Vianne's mother was a Native American and she follows their beliefs. Her red clothes contrast with the drab colours of the townspeople, showing her flamboyance and her tribal roots.

Chocolate was used as a drink sacred to the gods in Aztec and Mayan tradition. Vianne uses the 2,000 year-old recipe to make her drinking chocolate and flavours it with chilli as her ancestors did. Chocolate was believed to have the power to "unblock hidden yearnings and show destiny". Vianne is a great judge of character, using an ancient spinning disc to work out a customer's preferences in

chocolate by getting an insight into their psyche. It looks like magic to the unsophisticated townsfolk. The rigid scientific persona cannot begin to fathom such thought processing; it is incomprehensible to their closed minds and therefore must be crushed amidst accusations of heresy and witchcraft.

The Comte is determined to crush her as totally as his ancestor purged the town of Huguenots centuries before. He boasts that she "presents a far lesser challenge". He sets about poisoning the town against her, using the inexperienced and impressionable priest, Pierre Henri, as his pawn. In the book, it is the Church which opposes Vianne's "immorality", as indeed the Church once attempted to ban chocolate. The film follows the secular path, echoing Charles II's attempt to close down the English chocolate houses, which he considered to be "hotbeds of sedition".

Despite the Comte's valiant attempts to isolate her, Vianne's charm starts to win over the town. Vianne is open-hearted

and cannot comprehend the hypocrisy of social niceties. In many ways she is as innocent as her daughter, Anouk, who copes with the nomadic lifestyle she is forced to endure by having an imaginary kangaroo. All Anouk wants is a normal life, a mother who wears conventional clothes and lives a settled existence. Unable to tell her mother directly of her unhappiness at their lifestyle, she says the kangaroo has a bad paw so it must rest and stay in one town.

The negative side of the remedy

Vianne initially attracts the social outcasts of the town: the abused kleptomaniac, Josephine and Armande, the mother of the Comte's devoted secretary. Both characters show the shadow side of the remedy.

Josephine's character portrays the darkness of homeopathic Chocolate. She is abused by her husband, Serge, a slave to his brutality, too oppressed to break free until Vianne befriends her. (The chocolate and sugar industries have an appalling history of slavery. Even today cocoa beans are harvested by children sold into slavery by their impoverished families.)

When Josephine escapes from the clutches of her brutish husband, the Comte is outraged that the sacred marriage vows have been betrayed, until he witnesses the evidence of the beatings. He then takes Serge under his wing, determined to transform him into a gentleman. Vianne's mission to restore Josephine to her full potential is far more successful. She uses encouragement rather than the humiliation the Comte favours.

Armande is a very complex character. She is estranged from her widowed daughter, Caroline and her grandson, Luc. Caroline is besotted by the Comte and follows his rigid ways to the letter. She is terrified of losing Luc and stifles him with love. Armande, being free-spirited, cannot tolerate this, accusing Caroline of treating Luc like "a trained poodle". Both Armande and Vianne have dysfunctional relationships with their children. Chocolate can help women with this type of mothering issue. Many women needing chocolate are unable to form close bonds with their children or partners. Treatment with homeopathic Chocolate often leads to a softening of the woman. She stops feeling the need to be so independent and it allows her to reach out to others.

Luc is fascinated by blood and gore, a rebellion against his mother's strictness. He sees teeth, blood and a skull in the spinning wheel, indicative of the Aztec



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practice of human sacrifice. Chocolate was sacred to Quetzalcoatl, the plumed serpent god. It was foretold that the god would return and Montezuma welcomed Cortes in the mistaken belief he was the reincarnated god. As such the Spaniard was offered xocoatl (chocolate) in a gold cup. Traditionally the gold cups were thrown into Lake Tezcoco after use. This lake was drained by the Spaniards to retrieve the gold. Greed features heavily in the remedy profile. Chocolate can be used to treat eating disorders: bulimia and anorexia.

Chocolate was also sacred to the goddess of fertility and is reputed to have aphrodisiac properties. Indeed Casanova used it as a precursor to Viagra and the villagers soon discover this medicinal property.

Traditionally the Mayans used chocolate to cure coughs and fevers, typical tubercular complaints. Vianne's wanderlust alludes to this – she shows the rolling-stone mentality that is inherent to those with tubercular heritage. She moves with the sly north wind. She is so individual that she will always be on the fringes of society and, every time she is ostracised, her natural inclination is to move to fresher pastures. She is deeply attracted to the gypsy "river rat", Roux, being an identical spirit. She champions the cause of the "river rats" just as Armande champions her.

Transformation

Armande's motivation is that she sees a younger version of herself in Vianne. A happier self, before convention crushed her spirit, leaving her depressed and as bitter as the darkest chocolate. She is in fact suicidal, indulging in the "forbidden fruits", given her diabetes. Rather than be condemned to a nursing home as her daughter desires, she has Vianne cook an elaborate birthday meal using chocolate in every dish. It is literally "death by chocolate".

The destruction of the gypsies' boat and Armande's suicide break Vianne's spirit. She reverts to her old ways and prepares to leave the village with the north wind. Vianne's natural reaction to rejection is to move to another town. It is Josephine who saves her from herself by making her realise she is accepted by the town.

Vianne had planned a chocolate festival to coincide with Easter Sunday. The shop window is filled with "pagan symbols" and the Comte determines to destroy this mockery, not realising how much of Christian ritual is, in fact, derived from

paganism. The resurrection of Jesus is identical in concept to the Quetzalcoatl myths.

The Comte gets chocolate on his lips, which proves his undoing. All that pent up self-denial breaks through and he ends up in an orgy of indulgence. Vianne and the priest are the only witnesses to his weakness and both vow to keep the secret. That knowledge of the Comte's vulnerability allows the priest to liberate himself. Pierre Henri does not deliver the sermon carefully scripted for him by the Comte, choosing instead to preach tolerance and humanity: "We cannot measure goodness by what we don't do, by what we deny ourselves, and what we exclude."

Chocolate brought about a miraculous transformation in the fictional town of Lansquenet. Spirits were lifted, prejudices demolished, and a freedom from the hypocritical constraints imposed by society was established. Harmony replaced *tranquillité*. Everyone was touched by its effects and the wind changes to the south wind bringing Roux back to Vianne. Chocolate in potency has an equally magical and profound effect on the psyche.

Chocolate the remedy

In health the Chocolate personality is vivacious, charismatic, sensual and alluring. Although Chocolate is a plant, the remedy is often missed because the person needing it has such a magnetic personality that they are incorrectly assumed to require an animal remedy.

The Chocolate personality is very independent, never needing a man. She has a great gift for insight into people's characters and thus may be unjustly accused of practising witchcraft by the narrow-minded. When stressed, she may develop an eating disorder, either binge eating or developing anorexia. She will distance herself from her nearest and dearest and withdraw into a deep depression. Chocolate mothers find it hard to bond with their children and tend to move frequently, often leaving their children behind with the ex-partner. Chocolate often helps to cure deep-rooted depression especially when associated with acne and an addiction to chocolate.

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Theobroma cacao

"The cocoa bean is a phenomenon which nature has never repeated. Never have so many qualities been brought together in so small a fruit." Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859)

With tiny star-shaped flowers and surprisingly large pods popping straight from its trunk and branches the cacao tree is the source of chocolate. The early history of cacao cultivation remains a mystery with many believing the Aztecs to be the first to develop chocolate. However, the word cacao is Mayan (from Central America) and analysis of residue from a ceramic "teapot" suggests that the Maya and their ancestors may have been gobbling chocolate as far back as the Olmec civilization some 3,000 years ago. Revered as a tree of divine origin by the Central Americans, the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus reflected this sentiment when he gave the tree its botanical name *Theobroma cacao*. *Theobroma* in Greek means "food of the Gods".

The cacao tree

A fussy plant with exacting temperature, moisture and soil requirements, the cacao tree thrives almost exclusively in the narrow tropical belt, 10 to 20 degrees north and south of the equator. In this specialised habitat each tree produces thousands of flowers but only around 20 to 30 get pollinated and go on to produce the pod-like fruits. These pods vary in size, shape, colour and texture and each pod contains around 20 to 60 almond-shaped seeds surrounded by a satin white, sticky sweet pulp. It is these beans that give us our luscious chocolate but only after they have gone through the elaborate process of fermentation, drying, roasting, grinding, extraction, mixing and conching. Over the years the extensive cultivation and interbreeding of the cacao trees have produced three major cultivar groups. They are the rarer, prima donna-like Criollo, the high yielding, hardy and disease-resistant Forastero and the Criollo-Forastero hybrid, the Trinitario.

Chocolate

More than 90 per cent of the world's mass-produced chocolates are made from the harsh and bitter Forastero beans and these are graded as "bulk" or "ordinary" except for the Nacional



Photo courtesy of Sam Bridgewater

Arriba, a forastero variety grown solely in Ecuador which is considered a fine or flavour cacao. The almost bitter-free Criollo and Trinitario beans are the most sought after by chocolatiers and connoisseurs for their fine and delicate flavours and are used to make the "very fine" grade chocolates. Due to their high cocoa butter content, chocolates made from fine grade beans have a rich, velvety texture and melt just below body temperature with a "finish" flavour that is neither bitter nor astringent.

Health benefits

The beans contain several biologically active constituents and recent studies and reviews indicate that a regular intake of chocolate may have the potential to reduce cardiovascular diseases. Although stearic acid in the cocoa butter is a saturated fat, it does not raise LDL cholesterol (bad cholesterol) as it is converted to a heart-healthy monounsaturated fat in the liver.

And finally for chocolate to leave an even better taste in our mouth we can buy chocolate that is "equitably-traded" to help end poverty through sustainable commercial trade.

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